Beryl Markham

Introduced by Martha Gellhorn

'Markham lived out past the edges of herself, and that boldness and sheer originality come through on every page of *West With the Night* . . . A masterpiece'
Paula McLain, author of *The Paris Wife*

West with the Night

VIRAGO
MODERN CLASSICS

Beryl Markham

Beryl Markham was born in 1902 in Leicester. In 1906 the family moved to British East Africa and Beryl learnt to speak Swahili, Nandi and Masai as she spent her days hunting and playing with the local tribal people. She later became apprenticed to her father and helped him in the training and breeding of racehorses. In 1919, a disastrous drought struck and Beryl's father left for Peru. Beryl stayed, and at the age of eighteen became the first woman in Africa to be granted a racehorse trainer's licence. She married Mansfield Markham in 1927, the first of three marriages, and their son Gervase was born in London in 1929. In 1931 Beryl turned to flying. She regularly piloted mail for the East African Airways and later invented big game hunting by air. In September 1936 she became the first person to fly solo across the Atlantic from east to west – taking off in England and crash landing in Nova Scotia twenty-one hours and twenty-five minutes later.

West with the Night was first published to great acclaim in 1942, and Beryl Markham was still active as a prominent racehorse trainer when she died suddenly in 1986, aged eighty-three.

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For my father

I wish to express gratitude to Raoul Schumacher for his constant encouragement and his assistance in the preparations for this book.

I speak of Africa and golden joys

HENRY IV, ACT V, SC. 3

West With the Night

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INTRODUCTION

West with the Night is a fascination and a mystery. I do not intend to lessen the readers' excitement by mumbling over its content. Briefly, the book is an episodic account of some thirty Africa years, from childhood to 1936, in the life of an amazing woman. Beryl Markham was generally felt to be Circe in Kenya, but not your run-of-the-mill Circe. Imagine Circe casting a spell on Ulysses so she could go along on the journey, learn navigation, see the world. In passing, she bewitched his company of men so that they did not resent her intrusion in their macho society, but welcomed her. It was easy to entrance the whole lot, that being her nature, and she knew what she wanted: knowledge and adventure.

The term 'liberated woman' has always worried me. It implies a universal slavery from which, at last, in our day and age, women must raise their bowed heads and rebel. It also implies that men are freed, but they are not. In my opinion the entire human race has a hard time and the sexes should and will be partners in liberation from the prejudices and ignorance that harm us all. But women, like men, possessed of the courage and the will, have always led their chosen lives, regardless of any conventional limits.

I doubt that Beryl Markham ever heard of liberated women or, being devotedly feminine, ever thought about feminists. At the age of seventeen, in 1919, she simply packed her total possessions in two saddle bags and rode off, alone, to earn her living the only way she knew how. She had no home or family to return to. *West with the Night* is a record of bravery taken for granted; that touchingly brave seventeen-year-old girl set the pattern for the future.

Beryl Markham continued as she began, with daring, hard work and extraordinary success. And did not regard herself as a trail-blazer, by example a liberator of her sex. She rejoiced to live in Kenya, which is the paradise section of Africa, and rejoiced in her work.

I met Beryl Markham only once, convoked for some forgotten reason to drinks in a small loaned house by Lake Naivasha where she was training racehorses. That must have been in the early seventies. I drove

down the dirt track from my modest eyrie on the side of Longonot, the volcano that rises above the Rift Valley, wondering why I bothered. I knew nothing about horses and cared less. If this Nairobi lady had been a game warden or a paleontologist or a farm manager, I would have been intensely interested, eager to learn. Living outside the Nairobi European circle, I had never heard of Beryl and so arrived ignorant and already regretting the return trip, sixteen miles on that shambles road in the dark.

Beryl received me in a typical sitting room, 'settler' furnishings, big chairs and sofa covered in chintz, a stalwart piece to hold drinks and glasses. No books; it is a professional deformation always to notice books. Beryl wore tight black trousers and high necked silky black pullover; exotic clothing for upcountry where khaki prevailed. She looked very glamorous, fair hair, tanned face, splendid lean body; certainly not the least horsey as I would have expected. I jumped to instant wrong conclusions: this obvious darling of the Muthaiga Club, the ancient boring centre of Nairobi social life, trained racehorses, whatever that meant, for amusement.

Two admirers were visiting her, one older, one younger, and I was impressed by the way they leapt to be serviceable about drinks while Beryl waited gracefully to be waited on. Beryl was past her halfway sixties then; I took her to be a striking woman of forty. We fiddled with unnourishing, rather uneasy small talk. I guessed she would never be comfortable with women though clearly she could manage men and doubtless horses. She said she had written a book. Perhaps that was why I had been invited; she wanted to talk about her book. I missed the chance; I paid no attention. Only connect, E. M. Forster kept repeating. Appearances deceive but it was up to me to delve behind the appearance. I thanked Beryl for the drinks and left as ignorant as when I came. Now, more than ten years later, I regret my stupidity and the lost occasion.

If I had read her book then, I would have pursued her with all the questions that *West with the Night* leaves unanswered. Beryl says, rightly, that her book is not an autobiography. It ignores the essential information an autobiography should give.

She would not remember Leicestershire where she was born, having departed in 1906 at the age of four to accompany her father to unknown Kenya. But how did it happen that Captain Clutterbuck, educated at Sandhurst, took his daughter to Africa and left his son behind with his estranged wife? Beryl does not mention her mother and brother, nor her marriages (three), nor her son born in 1929. She writes with love and

admiration of her father; more is needed. Between the high peaks of the story she tells, there is deep shadow.

I have been questioning people about Beryl now. Again, as often before, she is living in loaned quarters, the gift of the Jockey Club, a small house near the Nairobi racecourse. She is still training racehorses, riding them, and said to a friend that she felt better on a horse than on her feet. I am also told that seeing Beryl from the back, walking down a Nairobi street with her wonderful stride and long blonde hair, you would think her a young woman. In the loaned house she has lately been robbed twice and badly beaten the second time, but still lives there. No woman could be more indifferent to her material surroundings, perhaps a habit picked up when her infant life began in a mud hut in the bush where her father was clearing land for a farm. People spoke with concern of Beryl being 'hard-up, as usual'. Endearingly, she has collected all kinds of trophies but not money.

West with the Night, which I think a mistaken title and a misnomer, suggests the prose style of the book. It is, I suppose, poetical, lyrical, perhaps 'evocative' is the word. The polished literary sentences surprise in a first (and last) book. Mostly it works well, sometimes beautifully; sometimes, it cloys. The soft words blur the tough facts, the tough achievements, and a life that was dangerous and hard. You have to read behind the words to realise just how hard, how dangerous. Even Beryl Markham's record and terrifying flight east to west across the Atlantic is smoothed by the style.

Timing is all, unfairly. *West with the Night* was published in America in 1942 and though it earned critical praise, that was the low ebb year of World War Two and people's minds were not free to revel in a golden Africa. In 1943, when *West with the Night* came out in England, paper rationing buried a book after one small edition and curtailed newspapers had little space for book reviews. But in 1937, when the English-reading world thought itself still at peace, Karen Blixen's *Out of Africa* appeared and had years to grow and spread and has become an accepted classic, the best known portrait of that Africa. I have re-read *Out of Africa* now for the first time since reading it soon after its publication; re-read and compared. I think *West with the Night* deserves a place as companion piece to *Out of Africa*.

This is not meant to be the sort of judgement critics make; it is all to do with subject matter, not literary style. Karen Blixen was already a professional writer when she wrote *Out of Africa* and writing, not farming in Africa, was her true purpose in life as she proved on

becoming Isak Dinesen. Beryl Markham was a woman of action, the way men are; her book is a freak event in her career. The tone of both books is similar but I would agree at once that Karen Blixen's is superior writing, the lyricism more disciplined. *Out of Africa* is deep like a well, Karen Blixen's farm and its life. *West with the Night* is as wide as the European horizons of that day. Beryl Markham knew more than the life of a farm though she knew that too, as a pioneer child and girl. Her description of the earliest bush flying in East Africa is memorable. Nothing could give a stronger sense of the vastness, the peril, and the unwelcoming beauty of the land. Both books are love letters to Africa, their Africa; not rivals, complementary to each other.

My favourite passage in *West with the Night* is unlike the rest of the book; it has no literary style at all. Beryl scribbled this message in the cockpit of her plane and flung it down, in a message bag, to the white hunter, Baron Blixen, waiting on the ground below. Beryl was then flying over thick bush country near the Tana river, hired to spot elephant for Blixen's safari client.

> *Very* big bull – tusks quite even – my guess over 180-pounder. In herd of about 500. Two other bulls and many babies in herd – grazing peacefully. Dense growth – high trees – two water holes – one about half-mile from herd NNE. One about two miles WNW. Fairly open ground between you and herd, with open glade halfway. Many tracks. Large herd buffalo SW of elephant. No rhino sighted. Your course 220 degrees. Distance about ten miles. Will be back in one hour. Work hard, trust in God, and keep your bowels open – Oliver Cromwell.

That is the nearest I feel I have come to the real woman, fearless competent professional, and funny as well. The mystery of *West with the Night* remains: Beryl Markham herself.

Martha Gellhorn, Newchurch West, 1984

BOOK ONE

1

Message from Nungwe

How is it possible to bring order out of memory? I should like to begin at the beginning, patiently, like a weaver at his loom. I should like to say, ‘This is the place to start; there can be no other.’

But there are a hundred places to start for there are a hundred names – Mwanza, Serengetti, Nungwe, Molo, Nakuru. There are easily a hundred names, and I can begin best by choosing one of them – not because it is first nor of any importance in a wildly adventurous sense, but because here it happens to be, turned uppermost in my logbook. After all, I am no weaver. Weavers create. This is remembrance – revisitation; and names are keys that open corridors no longer fresh in the mind, but nonetheless familiar in the heart.

So the name shall be Nungwe – as good as any other – entered like this in the log, lending reality, if not order, to memory:

DATE – 16/6/35
TYPE AIRCRAFT – Avro Avian
MARKINGS – VP – KAN
JOURNEY – Nairobi to Nungwe
TIME – 3 hrs. 40 mins.

After that comes, PILOT: Self; and REMARKS – of which there were none. But there might have been.

Nungwe may be dead and forgotten now. It was barely alive when I went there in 1935. It lay west and south of Nairobi on the southernmost rim of Lake Victoria Nyanza, no more than a starveling outpost of grubby huts, and that only because a weary and discouraged prospector one day saw a speck of gold clinging to the mud on the heel of his boot. He lifted the speck with the tip of his hunting knife and stared at it until

it grew in his imagination from a tiny, rusty grain to a nugget, and from a nugget to a fabulous stake.

His name eludes the memory, but he was not a secretive man. In a little while Nungwe, which had been no more than a word, was both a Mecca and a mirage, so that other adventurers like himself discounted the burning heat of the country, the malaria, the blackwater, the utter lack of communications except by foot through forest trails, and went there with shovels and picks and quinine and tinned food and high hopes, and began to dig.

I never knew what their digging got them, if it got them anything, because, when I set my small biplane down on the narrow runway they had hacked out of the bush, it was night and there were fires of oil-soaked rags burning in bent chunks of tin to guide my landing.

There's not much to be seen in light like that – some dark upturned faces impassive and patient, half-raised arms beckoning, the shadow of a dog slouching between the flares. I remember these things and the men who greeted me at Nungwe. But I took off again after dawn without learning anything about the success of their operations or the wealth of their mine.

It wasn't that they meant to keep those things concealed; it was just that they had other things to think about that night, and none of them had to do with gold.

I had been working out of Nairobi as a free-lance pilot with the Muthaiga Country Club as my headquarters. Even in 1935 it wasn't easy to get a plane in East Africa and it was almost impossible to get very far across country without one. There were roads, of course, leading in a dozen directions out of Nairobi. They started out boldly enough, but grew narrow and rough after a few miles and dwindled into the rock-studded hills, or lost themselves in a morass of red muram mud or black cotton soil, in the flat country and the valleys. On a map they look sturdy and incapable of deceit, but to have ventured from Nairobi south toward Machakos or Magadi in anything less formidable than a moderately powered John Deere tractor was optimistic to the point of sheer whimsy, and the road to the Anglo-Egyptian Sudan, north and west through Naivasha, called 'practicable' in the dry season, had, when I last used it after a mild rain, an adhesive quality equal to that of the most prized black treacle.

This minor defect, coupled with the fact that thousands of miles of papyrus swamp and deep desert lie between Naivasha and Khartoum, had been almost flippantly overlooked by a Government road

commission which had caused the erection, near Naivasha, of an impressive and beautiful signpost reading:

To JUBA – KHARTOUM – CAIRO –

I have never known whether this questionable encouragement to the casual traveller was only the result of well-meant wishful thinking or whether some official cursed with a depraved and sadistic humour had found an outlet for it after years of repression in a muggy Nairobi office. In any case, there the sign stood, like a beacon, daring all and sundry to proceed (not even with caution) toward what was almost sure to be neither Khartoum nor Cairo, but a Slough of Despond more tangible than, but at least as hopeless as Mr Bunyan's.

This was, of course, an exception. The more travelled roads were good and often paved for a short distance, but once the pavement ended, an aeroplane, if one were at hand, could save hours of weary toil behind the wheel of a lurching car – provided the driver were skilful enough to keep it lurching at all. My plane, though only a two-seater, was busy most of the time in spite of competition from the then barely budding East African – not to say the full-blown Wilson – Airways.

Nairobi itself was busy and growing – gateway to a still new country, a big country, an almost unknown country. In less than thirty years the town had sprung from a collection of corrugated iron shacks serving the spindly Uganda Railway to a sprawling welter of British, Boers, Indians, Somalis, Abyssinians, natives from all over Africa and a dozen other places.

Today its Indian Bazaar alone covers several acres; its hotels, its government offices, its race-course, and its churches are imposing evidence that modern times and methods have at last caught up with East Africa. But the core of it is still raw and hardly softened at all by the weighty hand of British officialdom. Business goes on, banks flourish, automobiles purr importantly up and down Government Road, and shopgirls and clerks think, act, and live about as they do in any modern settlement of thirty-odd thousand in any country anywhere.

The town lies snugly against the Athi Plains at the foot of the rolling Kikuyu Hills, looking north to Mount Kenya and south to Kilimanjaro in Tanganyika. It is a counting house in the wilderness – a place of shillings and pounds and land sales and trade, extraordinary successes and extraordinary failures. Its shops sell whatever you need to buy. Farms

and coffee plantations surround it for more than a hundred miles and goods trains and lorries supply its markets with produce daily.

But what is a hundred miles in a country so big?

Beyond are villages still sleeping in the forests, on the great reservations – villages peopled with human beings only vaguely aware that the even course of their racial life may somehow be endangered by the persistent and irresistible pressure of the White man.

But white men's wars are fought on the edges of Africa – you can carry a machine gun three hundred miles inland from the sea and you are still on the edge of it. Since Carthage, and before, men have hacked and scrabbled for permanent footholds along the coasts and in the deserts and on the mountains, and where these footholds have been secured, the right to hold them has been the cause of endless dispute and bloodshed.

Competitors in conquest have overlooked the vital soul of Africa herself, from which emanates the true resistance to conquest. The soul is not dead, but silent, the wisdom not lacking, but of such simplicity as to be counted non-existent in the tinker's mind of modern civilization. Africa is of an ancient age and the blood of many of her peoples is as venerable and as chaste as truth. What upstart race, sprung from some recent, callow century to arm itself with steel and boastfulness, can match in purity the blood of a single Masai Murani whose heritage may have stemmed not far from Eden? It is not the weed that is corrupt; roots of the weed sucked first life from the genesis of earth and hold the essence of it still. Always the weed returns; the cultured plant retreats before it. Racial purity, true aristocracy, devolve not from edict, nor from rote, but from the preservation of kinship with the elemental forces and purposes of life whose understanding is not farther beyond the mind of a Native shepherd than beyond the cultured fumblings of a mortar-board intelligence.

Whatever happens, armies will continue to rumble, colonies may change masters, and in the face of it all Africa lies, and will lie, like a great, wisely somnolent giant unmolested by the noisy drum-rolling of bickering empires. It is not only a land; it is an entity born of one man's hope and another man's fancy.

So there are many Africas. There are as many Africas as there are books about Africa – and as many books about it as you could read in a leisurely lifetime. Whoever writes a new one can afford a certain complacency in the knowledge that his is a new picture agreeing with no one else's, but likely to be haughtily disagreed with by all those who believe in some other Africa.

Doctor Livingstone's Africa was a pretty dark one. There have been a lot of Africas since that, some darker, some bright, most of them full of animals and pygmies, and a few mildly hysterical about the weather, the jungle, and the trials of safari.

All of these books, or at least as many of them as I have read, are accurate in their various portrayals of Africa – not my Africa, perhaps, nor that of an early settler, nor of a veteran of the Boer War, nor of an American millionaire who went there and shot zebra and lion, but of an Africa true to each writer of each book. Being thus all things to all authors, it follows, I suppose, that Africa must be all things to all readers.

Africa is mystic; it is wild; it is a sweltering inferno; it is a photographer's paradise, a hunter's Valhalla, an escapist's Utopia. It is what you will, and it withstands all interpretations. It is the last vestige of a dead world or the cradle of a shiny new one. To a lot of people, as to myself, it is just 'home'. It is all these things but one thing – it is never dull.

From the time I arrived in British East Africa at the indifferent age of four and went through the barefoot stage of early youth hunting wild pig with the Nandi, later training race-horses for a living, and still later scouting Tanganyika and the waterless bush country between the Tana and Athi Rivers, by aeroplane, for elephant, I remained so happily provincial I was unable to discuss the boredom of being alive with any intelligence until I had gone to London and lived there a year. Boredom, like hookworm, is endemic.

I have lifted my plane from the Nairobi airport for perhaps a thousand flights and I have never felt her wheels glide from the earth into the air without knowing the uncertainty and the exhilaration of firstborn adventure.

The call that took me to Nungwe came about one o'clock in the morning relayed from Muthaiga Country Club to my small cottage in the eucalyptus grove near-by.

It was a brief message asking that a cylinder of oxygen be flown to the settlement at once for the treatment of a gold miner near death with a lung disease. The appeal was signed with a name I had never heard, and I remember thinking that there was a kind of pathetic optimism about its having been sent at all, because the only way it could have reached me was through the telegraph station at Mwanza – itself a hundred miles by Native runner from Nungwe. During the two or three days the message

had been on its way, a man in need of oxygen must either have died or shown a superhuman determination to live.

So far as I know I was the only professional woman pilot in Africa at that time. I had no free-lance competition in Kenya, man or woman, and such messages, or at least others not always so urgent or melancholy, were frequent enough to keep me occupied most days and far too many nights.

Night flying over charted country by the aid of instruments and radio guidance can still be a lonely business, but to fly in unbroken darkness without even the cold companionship of a pair of ear-phones or the knowledge that somewhere ahead are lights and life and a well-marked airport is something more than just lonely. It is at times unreal to the point where the existence of other people seems not even a reasonable probability. The hills, the forests, the rocks, and the plains are one with the darkness, and the darkness is infinite. The earth is no more your planet than is a distant star – if a star is shining; the plane is your planet and you are its sole inhabitant.

Before such a flight it was this anticipation of aloneness more than any thought of physical danger that used to haunt me a little and make me wonder sometimes if mine was the most wonderful job in the world after all. I always concluded that lonely or not it was still free from the curse of boredom.

Under ordinary circumstances I should have been at the aerodrome ready to take off for Nungwe in less than half an hour, but instead I found myself confronted with a problem much too difficult to solve while still half asleep and at one o'clock in the morning. It was one of those problems that seem incapable of solution – and are; but which, once they have fastened themselves upon you, can neither be escaped nor ignored.

A pilot, a man named Wood who flew for East African Airways, was down somewhere on the vast Serengetti Plains and had been missing for two days. To me and to all of his friends, he was just Woody – a good flier and a likeable person. He was a familiar figure in Nairobi and, though word of his disappearance had been slow in finding attention, once it was realized that he was not simply overdue, but lost, there was a good deal of excitement. Some of this, I suppose, was no more than the usual public enjoyment of suspense and melodrama, though there was seldom a scarcity of either in Nairobi.

Where Woody's misfortune was most sincerely felt, of course, was amongst those of his own profession. I do not mean pilots alone. Few

people realize the agony and anxiety a conscientious ground engineer can suffer if an aeroplane he has signed out fails to return. He will not always consider the probability of bad weather or a possible error of judgement on the part of the pilot, but instead will torture himself with unanswerable questions about proper wiring, fuel lines, carburation, valves, and all the hundred and one things he must think about. He will feel that on this occasion he must surely have overlooked something – some small but vital adjustment which, because of his neglect, has resulted in the crash of a plane or the death of a pilot.

All the members of a ground crew, no matter how poorly equipped or how small the aerodrome on which they work, will share equally the apprehension and the nervous strain that come with the first hint of mishap.

But whether storm, or engine trouble, or whatever the cause, Woody had disappeared, and for the past two days I had been droning my plane back and forth over the Northern Serengetti and half the Masai Reserve without having sighted so much as a plume of signal smoke or the glint of sunlight on a crumpled wing.

Anxiety was increasing, even changing to gloom, and I had expected to take off again at sunrise to continue the search; but here suddenly was the message from Nungwe.

For all professional pilots there exists a kind of guild, without charter and without by-laws. It demands no requirements for inclusion save an understanding of the wind, the compass, the rudder, and fair fellowship. It is a camaraderie *sans* sentiment of the kind that men who once sailed uncharted seas in wooden ships must have known and lived by.

I was my own employer, my own pilot, and as often as not my own ground engineer as well. As such I might easily, perhaps even justifiably, have refused the flight to Nungwe, arguing that the rescue of the lost pilot was more important – as, to me, it was. But there was a tinge of personal sympathy about such reasoning that weakened conviction, and Woody, whom I knew so little and yet so well that I never bothered to remember his full name any more than most of his friends did, would have been quick to reject a decision that favoured him at the expense of an unknown miner choking his lungs out in the soggy swamplands of Victoria Nyanza.

In the end I telephoned the Nairobi Hospital, made sure that the oxygen would be ready, and prepared to fly south.

Three hundred and fifty miles can be no distance in a plane, or it can be from where you are to the end of the earth. It depends on so many

things. If it is night, it depends on the depth of the darkness and the height of the clouds, the speed of the wind, the stars, the fullness of the moon. It depends on you, if you fly alone – not only on your ability to steer your course or to keep your altitude, but upon the things that live in your mind while you swing suspended between the earth and the silent sky. Some of those things take root and are with you long after the flight itself is a memory, but, if your course was over any part of Africa, even the memory will remain strong.

When, much later than Nungwe or Tripoli or Zanzibar, or any of the remote and sometimes outlandish places I have flown to, I crossed the North Atlantic, east to west, there were headlines, fanfare, and, for me, many sleepless nights. A generous American press found that flight spectacular – and what is spectacular is news.

But to leave Nairobi and arrive at Nungwe is not spectacular. It is not news. It is only a little hop from here to there, and to one who does not know the plains of Africa, its swamps, its night sounds and its night silences, such a flight is not only unspectacular, but perhaps tedious as well. Only not to me, for Africa was the breath and life of my childhood.

It is still the host of all my darkest fears, the cradle of mysteries always intriguing, but never wholly solved. It is the remembrance of sunlight and green hills, cool water and the yellow warmth of bright mornings. It is as ruthless as any sea, more uncompromising than its own deserts. It is without temperance in its harshness or in its favours. It yields nothing, offering much to men of all races.

But the soul of Africa, its integrity, the slow inexorable pulse of its life, is its own and of such singular rhythm that no outsider, unless steeped from childhood in its endless, even beat, can ever hope to experience it, except only as a bystander might experience a Masai war dance knowing nothing of its music nor the meaning of its steps.

So I am off to Nungwe – a silly word, a silly place. A place of small hopes and small successes, buried like the inconsequential treasure of an imaginative miser, out of bounds and out of most men's wanting – below the Mau Escarpment, below the Speke Gulf, below the unsurveyed stretches of the Western Province.

Oxygen to a sick miner. But this flight is not heroic. It is not even romantic. It is a job of work, a job to be done at an uncomfortable hour with sleep in my eyes and half a grumble on my lips.

Arab Ruta calls contact and swings the propeller.

Arab Ruta is a Nandi, anthropologically a member of a Nilotic tribe, humanly a member of a smaller tribe, a more elect tribe, the tribe composed of those too few, precisely sensitive, but altogether indomitable individuals contributed sparingly by each race, exclusively by none.

He is of the tribe that observes with equal respect the soft voice and the hardened hand, the fullness of a flower, the quick finality of death. His is the laughter of a free man happy at his work, a strong man with lust for living. He is not black. His skin holds the sheen and warmth of used copper. His eyes are dark and wide-spaced, his nose full-boned and capable of arrogance.

He is arrogant now, swinging the propeller, laying his lean hands on the curved wood, feeling an exultant kinship in the coiled resistance to his thrust.

He swings hard. A splutter, a strangled cough from the engine like the premature stirring of a sleep-slugged labourer. In the cockpit I push gently on the throttle, easing it forward, rousing the motor, feeding it, soothing it.

Arab Ruta moves the wooden chocks from the wheels and steps backward away from the wing. Fitful splashes of crimson light from crude-oil torches set round the field stain the dark cloth of the African night and play upon his alert, high-boned face. He raises his hand and I nod as the propeller, whirring itself into invisibility, pulls the plane forward, past him.

I leave him no instructions, no orders. When I return he will be there. It is an understanding of many years – a wordless understanding from the days when Arab Ruta first came into my father's service on the farm at Njoro. He will be there, as a servant, as a friend – waiting.

I peer ahead along the narrow muram runway. I gather speed meeting the wind, using the wind.

A high wire fence surrounds the aerodrome – a wire fence and then a deep ditch. Where is there another aerodrome fenced against wild animals? Zebra, wildebeest, giraffe, eland – at night they lurk about the tall barrier staring with curious wild eyes into the flat field, feeling cheated.

They are well out of it, for themselves and for me. It would be a hard fate to go down in the memory of one's friends as having been tripped up by a wandering zebra. 'Tried to take off and hit a zebra!' It lacks even the dignity of crashing into an anthill.

Watch the fence. Watch the flares. I watch both and take off into the night.

Ahead of me lies a land that is unknown to the rest of the world and only vaguely known to the African – a strange mixture of grasslands, scrub, desert sand like long waves of the southern ocean. Forest, still water, and age-old mountains, stark and grim like mountains of the moon. Salt lakes, and rivers that have no water. Swamps. Badlands. Land without life. Land teeming with life – all of the dusty past, all of the future.

The air takes me into its realm. Night envelops me entirely, leaving me out of touch with the earth, leaving me within this small moving world of my own, living in space with the stars.

My plane is a light one, a two-seater with her registration letters, VP-KAN, painted boldly on her turquoise-blue fuselage in silver.

In the daytime she is a small gay complement to the airy blue of the sky, like a bright fish under the surface of a clear sea. In darkness such as this she is no more than a passing murmur, a soft, incongruous murmur above the earth.

With such registration letters as hers, it requires of my friends no great imagination or humour to speak of her always as just ‘the Kan’ – and the Kan she is, even to me. But this is not libel, for such nicknames are born out of love.

To me she is alive and to me she speaks. I feel through the soles of my feet on the rudder-bar the willing strain and flex of her muscles. The resonant, guttural voice of her exhausts has a timbre more articulate than wood and steel, more vibrant than wires and sparks and pounding pistons.

She speaks to me now, saying the wind is right, the night is fair, the effort asked of her well within her powers.

I fly swiftly. I fly high – south-southwest, over the Ngong Hills. I am relaxed. My right hand rests upon the stick in easy communication with the will and the way of the plane. I sit in the rear, the front cockpit filled with the heavy tank of oxygen strapped upright in the seat, its round stiff dome foolishly reminding me of the poised rigidity of a passenger on first flight.

The wind in the wires is like the tearing of soft silk under the blended drone of engine and propeller. Time and distance together slip smoothly past the tips of my wings without sound, without return, as I peer downward over the night-shadowed hollows of the Rift Valley and wonder if Woody, the lost pilot, could be there, a small human pinpoint

of hope and of hopelessness listening to the low, unconcerned song of the Avian – flying elsewhere.

2

Men with Blackwater Die

There is a feeling of absolute finality about the end of a flight through darkness. The whole scheme of things with which you have lived acutely, during hours of roaring sound in an element altogether detached from the world, ceases abruptly. The plane noses groundward, the wings strain to the firmer cushion of earthbound air, wheels touch, and the engine sighs into silence. The dream of flight is suddenly gone before the mundane realities of growing grass and swirling dust, the slow plodding of men and the enduring patience of rooted trees. Freedom escapes you again, and wings that were a moment ago no less than an eagle's, and swifter, are metal and wood once more, inert and heavy.

The clearing at Nungwe blinked into my horizon about half an hour before dawn. At a thousand feet the wavering crude-oil torches outlined no more than a narrow runway – a thin scar on the vast sprawled body of the wilderness.

I circled once, watching the flares yield to the rising wind, gauging the direction of its flow. Shadows that were made by moving men criss-crossed the clearing, shifted, changed design, and became immobile.

A gentle pull on the throttle eased the motor to an effortless hum. I held the nose of the Avian on the beacons until the earth sped under her, and the wheels, reaching for solid ground, swept her onto the runway in a maelstrom of dust and flickering orange light. I cut the engine, relaxed in the seat, and adjusted my ears to the emptiness of silence.

The air was heavy, with life gone out of it. Men's voices came from across the runway, sounding, after the deep drone of the plane, like the thin bleating of reed pipes or like the fluted whispers of a bamboo forest.

I climbed out of the cockpit and watched a band of dim figures approach before the dancing flares. By the manner of their walk and by their clothes, I could see that most of them were black – Kavirondo,

bulky-thighed in their half-nakedness, following two white men who moved with quicker, more eager steps over the clearing.

Somewhere an ancient automobile engine roared into life, its worn pistons and bearings hammering like drumbeats. Hot night wind stalked through the thorn trees and leleshwa that surrounded the clearing. It bore the odour of swampland, the smell of Lake Victoria, the breath of weeds and sultry plains and tangled bush. It whipped at the oil flares and snatched at the surfaces of the Avian. But there was loneliness in it and aimlessness, as if its passing were only a sterile duty lacking even the beneficent promise of rain.

Leaning against the fuselage, I watched the face of a short, chunky man loom gradually larger until it was framed before me in the uncertain light. It was a flabby face under a patch of greying hair and it held two brown eyes that seemed trapped in a spider web of weary lines.

Its owner smiled and held out his hand and I took it.

'I am the doctor,' he said; 'I sent the message.' He jerked his head toward the other white man at his elbow. 'This is Ebert. Ask him for anything you need – tea, food, whatever you want. It won't be good, but you're welcome to it.'

Before I could answer, he turned away, mumbling as he went about sickness, and the time of night, and the slowness of the box-body Ford now lurching across the runway to pick up the oxygen. In his wake followed half a dozen Kavirondo, any one of them big enough to lift the little doctor off the ground and carry him, like a small goat, under one arm. Instead they slouched dutifully behind at a distance I thought must have been kept so precisely unaltered out of simple fear and honest respect, blended to perfection.

'You're early,' Ebert said; 'you made good time.'

He was tall and angular in a grey, work-stained shirt and loose corduroy trousers patched many times. He spoke apologetically as if, as a visitor from the remote and glamorous civilization of Nairobi, I might find my reception somehow less than I had the right to expect.

'We fixed the runway,' he said, 'as well as we could.'

I nodded, looking into a lean-boned, sun-beaten face.

'It's a good job,' I assured him – 'better than I had hoped for.'

'And we rigged up a windsock.' He swung his arm in the direction of a slender pole whose base was surrounded by half a dozen flares. At the top of the pole hung a limp cylinder of cheap, white 'Americani' cloth looking a bit like an amputated pyjama leg.

In such a breeze the cylinder ought to have been fully extended, but instead, and in defiance of the simplest laws of physics, it only dangled in shameless indifference to both the strength of the wind and its direction.

Moving closer, I saw the lower end had been sewn as tightly shut as needle and thread could make it, so that, as an instrument intended to indicate wind tendency, it was rather less efficient than a pair of whole pyjamas might have been.

I explained this technical error of design to Ebert and, in the half-light of the oil torches, had the satisfaction of seeing his face relax into what I suspected was his first smile in a long, long time.

'It was the word "sock",' he said, 'that confused us. We couldn't imagine a proper sock with a hole in its toe – not even a windsock!'

With the help of the little doctor who had lapsed into preoccupied silence, we unstrapped the oxygen tank, lifted it from the front cockpit, and set it on the ground. It was not terribly heavy, but the Kavirondo who gaily picked it up and walked with it toward the Ford bore the thick metal cylinder as if it had been no more than a light bedroll.

It is this combination of physical strength and willingness to work that has made the Kavirondo the most tractable and dependable source of labour in East Africa.

From the loose confines of their native territory, which originally stretched south from Mount Elgon along the eastern shores of Victoria Nyanza for two hundred miles or so, they have wandered in all directions, mingling and working and laughing until what was once an obscure and timid tribe is now so ubiquitous as to cause the unobservant traveller in East Africa to suspect all natives are Kavirondo. This misconception is harmless enough in itself, but is best left unrevealed in the presence of such fire-eaters as the Nandi, the Somali, or the Masai, the racial vanity of any one of whom is hardly less than that of the proudest proud Englishman.

The Kavirondo, though not racially conscious, is at least conscious of being alive and finds endless pleasure in that cheerful realization alone. He is the porter of Africa, the man-of-all-work, the happy-go-lucky buffoon. To the charge of other and sterner tribes that he is not only uncircumcised, but that he eats dead meat without much concern about the manner of its killing, he is blandly indifferent. His resistance to White infiltration is, at best, passive, but, consisting as it does of the simple stratagem of eating heartily and breeding profusely, it may one day be found formidable enough.

My cargo of oxygen having been unloaded, I watched a group of these massive and powerful men gather round my plane, eyeing her trim lines with flattering curiosity. One of the largest of the lot, having stared at her with gaping mouth for a full minute, suddenly leaned back on his heels and roared with laughter that must have put the nearest hyena to shame if not to flight.

When I asked him, in Swahili, to explain the joke, he looked profoundly hurt. There wasn't any joke, he said. It was just that the plane was so smooth and her wings so strong that it made him want to laugh!

I couldn't help wondering what Africa would have been like if such physique as these Kavirondo had were coupled with equal intelligence – or perhaps I should say with cunning equal to that of their white brethren.

I suppose in that case the road to Nungwe would be wide and handsome and lined with filling stations, and the shores of Lake Victoria would be dotted with pleasure resorts linked to Nairobi and the coast by competitive railways probably advertising themselves as the Kavirondo or Kikuyu Lines. The undeveloped and 'savage' country would be transformed from a wasteland to a paradise of suburban homes and quaint bathing cabanas and popular beaches, all redolent, on hot days, of the subtle aroma of European culture. But the essence of progress is time, and we can only wait.

According to my still apologetic host, Ebert, the little doctor would have to drive at least an hour before reaching the actual Nungwe mine site where his patient lay in a grass hut, too sick to be moved.

'The doc's tried everything,' Ebert said, as we listened to the splutter of the disappearing Ford – 'diet, medicine, even witchcraft, I think; now the oxygen. The sick chap's a gold miner. Lungs gone. Weak heart. He's still alive, but for God knows how long. They keep coming out here and they keep dying. There's gold all right, but it'll never be a boom town – except for undertakers.'

There seemed to be no answer to this gloomy prediction, but I noticed that at least Ebert had made it with something that resembled a sour smile. I thought of Woody again and wondered if there could be even a remote hope of finding him on the way back to Nairobi. Perhaps not, but I made up my mind to leave as soon as I could gracefully get away.

I saw to it that the Avian was safe on the runway, and then, with Ebert, walked toward the settlement past the rows of oil flares, pink and impotent now in the early dawn.

Grey blades of light sliced at the darkness and within a few moments I could see the mining camp in all its bleak and somehow courageous isolation – a handful of thatched huts, a tangle of worn machinery, a storehouse of corrugated iron. Dogs, hollow-bellied and dispirited, sprawled in the dust, and behind the twisted arms of the surrounding thorn trees the country lay like an abandoned theatrical backdrop, tarnished and yellow.

I saw no women, no children. Here under the equatorial sun of Africa was a spot without human warmth, a community without even laughter.

Ebert led me through the door of one of the largest huts and promised tea, remarking hopefully that I might not find it too bad, since, only eight months ago, his store had been replenished from the stock of a Hindu shop in Kisumu.

He disappeared through an exit at the rear of the room and I leaned back in a chair and looked around me.

A hurricane lamp with a cracked, soot-smeared chimney still spluttered in the centre of a long plank that served as a table and was supported by two up-ended barrels on an earthen floor. Behind the plank were shelves sprinkled with tins of bully beef, vegetables and soup, mostly of American concoction. Several old copies of *Punch* were stacked at one end of the plank and, on the seat of the chair opposite mine, was an issue of the *Illustrated London News* dated October, 1929.

There was a radio, but it must have been voiceless for many months – tubes, wires, condenser, and dial, all bearing the marks of frequent and apparently futile renovation, lay in a hopeless mass on the top of a packing-crate marked: VIA MOMBASA.

I saw jars of black sand that must have contained gold, or hopes of it, and other jars labelled with cryptic figures that meant nothing to me, but were in any case empty. A blueprint clung to one of the walls and a spider, descending from the thatch overhead, contemplated the neatly drawn lines and figures and returned to its geometrically perfect web, unimpressed.

I stood up and walked to the window. It was no bigger than a small tea-tray and its lower half was battened with corrugated iron. In the path of the rising sun, scattered bush and tufts of grass laid a network of shadows over the earth, and, where these were thickest, I saw a single jackal forage expectantly in a mound of filth.

I returned to the chair feeling depressed and a little apprehensive. I began to think about Woody again – or at least to wonder, since there was really nothing to think about.

The sight of the jackal had brought to mind the scarcely comforting speculation that in Africa there is never any waste. Death particularly is never wasted. What the lion leaves, the hyena feasts upon and what scraps remain are morsels for the jackal, the vulture, or even the consuming sun.

I dug in the pockets of my flying overalls for a cigarette, lit it, and tried to shake off a wave of sleepiness. It was a futile effort, but a moment later Ebert returned carrying the tea-things on a tray and I was able to keep my eyes open, watching him move. I noticed that his face had become sombre again and thoughtful as if, during the time he had been out of the room, an old worry, or perhaps a new one, had begun to brew in his mind.

He set the tray on the long plank and groped for a tin of biscuits on a shelf. Sunlight, full-bodied and strong, had begun to warm the drab colours of the hut and I reached over and blew out the flame of the hurricane lamp.

‘You’ve heard of blackwater,’ Ebert said suddenly.

I straightened in my chair and for want of an ashtray ground my cigarette out with my foot on the earthen floor.